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ABSTRACT

The three last American writers to win the Nobel Prize represent American male novelists who have been unable either to come to terms with the "Otherness" of the female or to draw convincing portraits of women. As a result, women in their works are presented as female sterectypes of one kind or another. Hemingway shows a split attitude toward women, depicting realistically only those women who are either destructive or docile. Faulkner presents women in a vicious manner, revealing a definite misogyny, and Steinbeck portrays very few women, giving those few subordinate roles while the plot usually centers on the relationships of men. Unfortunately, the influence of these novelists on other American writers has been strong. (JM)

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SOME FICTIONAL STEREOTYPES OF WOMEN IN 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN FICTION

In recent years, with the raising of consciousness for both women and men, feminist criticism has taken its place among other, more traditional critical approaches. The portrayal of women in such varied literary forms as the Old Testament and Medieval Romances and by such diverse authors as Charles Dickens and Francois Mauriac is subjected to close scrutiny, re-evaluation, and in many cases harsh criticism. But, because it is our country and our century, perhaps the largest body of feminist criticism deals with American male writers. Though the sources of this criticism are multifarious, they are almost universally condemnatious. Time magazine, in a special issue on "The American Woman" comments, "Oddly women characters have never had a particularly important place in American Literature...." A Library Journal article by Diane Gersoni Stavn decries the negative stereotyping of women and girls in children's books. Ms. Gersoni finds that in fiction even the good writers "seem limited in their ability to convincingly handle sexually and intellectually emancipated, real late-adolescent females". Carolyn Heilbrun remonstrates against the "male-fantasy novel that forms the mainstream of U.S. fiction. .(and its) refusal to allow full humanity to women." According to Heilbrum, "America, alone among nations of high culture, has been in its novels as in its life, the great celebrator of the "manly" virtues of aggressiveness and violence, the great relegator of women to a place outside the meaningful life". A comparison of French and American Male novelists illustrates Heilbrun's thesis. Though France has its share of male chauvinist writers, there is also a strong tradition of female protagonists in French novels by males. Much of this criticism comes in the wake of the Women's Liberation Movement and follows the pattern set by Kate Millett in Sexual Politics. Ms. Millett sees misogynist literature as a primary vehicle of masculine hostility.

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and follows the pattern set by Kate Millett in Sexual Politics. Ms. Millett sees misogynist literature as a primary vehicle of masculine hostility. Though this literature has a strong historical tradition, Millett points out that in the twentieth century, with the abatement of censorship, there has been a new frankness in expressing this hostility in specific sexual contexts. The explicit portrayal of the degrading and insulting sexual exploitation of women, which was once forbidden outside of pornography, is now given free expression: a development with obvious anti-social implications. Once Millett has set up the historical and ideological background for sexual politics, she turns to a thorough roasting of those who helped to build the structure, the writers who as cultural agents reflect and shape attitudes. The main sources of her vituperation are D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer, the latter two being Americans. In line with our theory, Millett uses Genit, a French writer, as an opposite to Mailer.

"One of the main thrusts of my argument, however, is that this "failure" of American male novelists is not a recent issue, created and fed by feminist critics. For, though these attacks have gained new impetus and though most of the strident voices are now female, the tendency to negative stereotyping has been noted by significant male and female critics for at least three and a half decades. One of the main salvos, delivered more than a decade ago, was Leslie Fiedler's Love and Death in the American Novel. Fiedler's contention is that "The of Sentimentalism in the American novel not only made it exceedingly difficult for our writers to portray sexual passion, but prevented them as well from drawing convincing portraits of women". Fiedler, in his analysis of the deficiencies of the

American male character, reiterates what Simone de Beauvoir had explained so incisively as far back as 1949; the male inability to come to terms with the Otherness of the female. The concept of Otherness as de Beauvoir explains it has special pertinence to American authors.

Since the concept of Other has strong roots in the legend of Genesis which through the Judeo-Christian ethic is part and parcel of the majority of American theologies, it is naturally omnipresent in our society. In the mythology of the Christian West and therefore of the American mind, woman was created, not as a separate, unique entity, but from the body of man and for the purpose of complementing man. She is therefore not an end in herself, but a functionary of man's fulfillment. Man is the Subject, woman is the object, the Other. Is it any wonder that the American male novelist has difficulty in assigning full humanity to her?

The validity of this feminist criticism could be more readily dismissed if it were limited to a few non-representative writers. Its pertinence could be questioned if the criticisms were limited to less than major writers, but the charges have been leveled by a cadre of non-feminists and a large number of the charges are against our most prestigious authors. For the purposes of my thesis I have chosen Hemingway, Faulkner, and Steinbeck as representative of the American male novelist. This choice is not an arbitrary one. These men represent widely varying geographical locations: the North, the South, and the West coast; their works are textbook examples of the individuality of distinct styles; their subject matter is decidedly diverse. And as the last three Americans to win the Nobel Prize they represent the American novel for much of the rest of the world.

Perhaps the first critic to be sensitive to Hemingway's particular distorted depiction of women was Edmund Wilson. In 1939 Wilson pointed out

what he called Hemingway's growing antagonism to women, which was especially evident in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" and "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" as well as in The Fifth Column. Wilson observed that the antagonism came through in those works principally, but that the tendency could be traced through many of the other short stories such as "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife", "Hills Like White Elephants", "Cross Country Snow", and "An Alpine Idyll". Hemingway's early women are all frustrated or thwarted or die because of their relationships with men. Only the docile, submissive, "infra-Anglo Saxon" types provide satisfactory partners, and at that they often suffer the same fate as their more aggressive sisters. Wilson's line of reasoning was that there was a marked similarity between Hemingway and Kipling in this tendency. He defined it as a split-attitude toward women. Wilson labeled this an "instinct to get the woman down" and said that it changed from that in the early Michigan woods stories to a fear that the woman would get the man down in the African stories.

Carlos Baker, dean of Hemingway critics, as well as author of the definitive Hemingway biography, points out that Hemingway's failure to fulfill his desire to "tell it the way it was" results from his failure or his tacit refusal to depict realistically any but the women who occupy the two extremes of destructive deadliness or devoted docility. This failure, Mr. Baker explains, is because Hemingway sees women as aspects of the poetry of things. "His heroines, to make the statement exactly, are meant to show a symbolic or ritualistic function in the service of the artist and the service of man".

Hemingway comes under attack because his females are not real, or as Fiedler put it, not there at all. "There are no women in Hemingway"s books,' Fiedler contends because "in no case, can he quite succeed in making his females human...." Faulkner, on the other hand, stands accused of being

an obsessive misogynist. Fiedler states, "In no other writer in the world do pejorative stereotypes of women appear with greater frequency and on more levels. . ." Furthermore, Fiedler contends that if Faulkner had been writing about any racial minority, his books would have been banned. His attitude, however, reflects "a body of prejudice so deeply ingrained in Americans that even hysterically rendered it seems too familiar to be shocking". Whereas Hemingway has a few natural women who are redemptive, even Faulkner's "dewiest dells" turn out to be destroyers rather than redeemers.

Maxwell Geismar identifies Faulkner's misogyny with a protest against life. He diagnoses this attitude as "a hatred of life so compelling" that the crux of Faulkner's discontent comes to rest on women as the source of life. Geismar found that in Faulkner there is a definite disgust with the present that represents man's progress and a longing for the past when things were supposedly different. Long before the women's movement combined the woman and the Negro, Faulkner did. According to Geismar, the woman is seen as the symbol of the southern age of chivalry which has been perverted and the black is seen as the cause of the loss of the past life.

Whereas Hemingway has been criticized for his unrealistic depiction of women and Faulkner for his vicious one, in analyzing Steinbeck's fictional female creations, one encounters the problem of quantity as well as the problem of quality. There is a scarcity of women in the majority of Steinbeck's novels. Peter Lisca points the paucity of what might be called romantic love. Instead of boy meets girl, man meets man. Citing the close male relationships in eleven of Steinbeck's novels, Lisca comments, "There are women in these novels, but their allurements are overshadowed by the more solid attractions of male companionship". Another interesting phenomenon, pointed out by Lisca, is that in all of Steinbeck's work there

are only a half-dozen unmarried women who are not professional whores. "In the world of his fiction women do have a place, but they seem compelled to choose between home-making and whoredom".

Claude-Edmonde Magny also points out the subordinate and rather special role played by women in all of Steinbeck's novels. Instead of the traditional boy-meets-girl, the plot usually involves the encounter of two men and all that ensues from that particular relationship. This is true of Mac and Jim (In Dubious Battle), George and Linnie (Of Mice and Men), and Danny and Pilon (Tortilla Flat) to name a few examples. Magny questions the meaning of "true couple" as two males, concluding that, "The most apparent meaning--and one that is contrapuntally reinforced by other themes in the novels mentioned--is the expulsion of Woman from the true human community".

Space prevents presenting a thorough diagnosis of the kinds of, and reasons for, the female stereotypes in the works of the authors discussed. Their influence on other American novelists has been strong. Especially prevalent is a breed "who too early got hung up on Hemingway's jockstrap" as Mortense Calisher so aptly puts it. I would have hoped that consciousness of this tendency would influence works being published in the last decade, however, much that I have read lately convinces me that for the American male novelist, woman remains very much Other.